

Source: **The Sunday Times** [Malta], (1989)(24Sept.20-21)

Meeting People: Professor Godfrey Wettinger, Ph.D. (Lond)

J. Aquilina

[p.20]QUESTION: *How long have you been working on research in medieval Maltese history and what led you to it?*

ANSWER: Though my first training in History was primarily that of a medievalist, and I wrote a “project,” or long essay, on “The Coming of Count Roger to Malta in 1091” as long ago as 1947-48 (I do not possess a copy), I subsequently restricted my research almost entirely to the period of rule of the Order of St. John mainly by writing a thesis on “Slavery in Malta between 1530 and 1800” which gained me a Ph.D. from the University of London in 1971.

However, ever since I and Fr. M. Fsadni started researching the background to Peter Caxaro’s *Cantilena* back in 1966 I got caught up in medieval research. It was that experience which persuaded me that I could somehow tackle medieval writing and medieval Latin without too great a risk of making the most shocking and elementary linguistic and palaeographical errors. I have always regarded it as a field of study with great possibilities of the most extraordinary revisions of the accepted version of history since it had been first sketched out back in the 17th century and had only been revised in a few details since then. For me it was a challenge I could not ignore.

Q.: How relevant is the study of the medieval history of Malta to the concept of Maltese history as a whole?

A: Many of the most characteristic qualities of the Maltese scene – linguistic, topographic and religious – were fashioned out during the Middle Ages and owe little or nothing to earlier or later times. Thus our language owes its main grammatical basis to the entry of Arabic into Malta back in the ninth century; our topography with its rubble walls is the result largely of the medieval efforts of preventing soil erosion as well as delimiting land ownership; and our religious institutions are again largely based on medieval rather than earlier foundations in such matters as parish origins and titular dedications. Routes between one village and another as well as most country paths were traced out largely in the Middle Ages; the main characteristic of our buildings, their flat roofs, goes flat roofs, goes back to the Middle Ages (it is not clear whether it goes back any further); our place-names as well as the most constant and characteristic of our surnames all also trace their origin to the Middle Ages; and one could go on and mention lots of other features.

Q.: What particular qualifications are required of a historian of medieval Malta?

A.: They are the normal ones of historians of that period abroad: a knowledge of at least the practical aspects of palaeography, a working knowledge of Latin, chronology, [??] diplomatics; knowledge of Maltese and Arabic (and in one or two instances, of Greek) would help. One would, also, certainly need an independent mind. After all, historical research and historical writing are intellectual occupations; they are not exercises in group loyalty.

Q.: Don’t you think that the University of Malta should provide also a course in Palaeography?

A.: I think it should be possible and certainly it would be desirable for us to have such a course, preferably at the University. The last such course I know of was given in the immediate pre-war years by Professor Roberto Valentini. Since then, a number of Maltese scholars have followed similar courses abroad or by correspondence for the higher external degrees of London University.

Latin and Arabic

Q.: How useful in your opinion is Latin for historical research, particularly in your field of medieval studies?

A.: Most of the available documentation of European medieval history, including that for Malta, of course, is in Latin. It is a simplified Latin, sometimes influenced by the Romance languages into which Classical Latin had developed, with a limited vocabulary. Equipped with its knowledge, the student of the Middle Ages can get somewhere; without it, he had better turn to something else.

Q.: Would not a good knowledge of Arabic also be useful?

A.: At the time in which Com. G.F. Abela wrote not a single reference to Malta in Arabic writings was known. Now more than a score of such references have been found, and it would seem that many other references could still be discovered in the works, apparently, even of the foremost writers in Arabic such as Al-Bakri. It is also probable that much may lie unnoticed in non-historical works in Arabic. Unfortunately, Maltese historians normally have at best only a very limited knowledge of Arabic, and foreign scholars who know Arabic have no interest in Malta.

Q.: Malta is an island; but can history be insular?

A.: The history of any portion of humanity studied in isolation cannot but be unsatisfactory: one would always want to know how that portion interrelated with people outside. The island of Malta has practically always had constant and pervasive contact with the outside world. After all, Sicily is almost within sight of Malta, and North Africa and Italy are not all that far away that they did not frequently make themselves felt in Maltese affairs.

Q.: Are you satisfied that there is genuine interest in our history?

A.: There is certainly a deep and even emotional interest in Maltese history among most Maltese people, even among those without any great pretensions to scholarship. This arises partly from the natural interest anyone would have in tracing the origin of the world around him. Unfortunately, sometimes people get caught up emotionally in foolish disputes on priority of origin of family, parish, devotion, political party, etc., and this certainly affects the genuineness of their interest in history. Such persons accept what is historically true largely only when and in so far as it satisfies their own personal or group ego.

Q.: What in your opinion should be done to create a deeper awareness of the importance of history for our sense of nationhood?

A.: We should study more profoundly the national origins and all later significant historical developments. Instead of memorising lists of kings, governors, grand masters, and possibly studying their achievements, we should now turn our attention to the development of the national characteristics of the Maltese people, not in order to show that the latter had any particularly better merits than other peoples, but merely and precisely in order to understand ourselves at least a shade better than we do at the moment.

Language and history

Q.: What are the links that unify the study of the Maltese language and the history of Malta?

A.: Obviously, the origin of the Maltese language is a phenomenon which happened in history and can be studied historically by the historian who is suitably equipped linguistically or the linguist who is similarly suitably equipped historically. One of the links would be the place-names as recorded in the earliest surviving documents. But possibly particular features of the language itself could be of historical interest semantically, morphologically, and otherwise. In the 15th century we now have Peter Caxaro's *Cantilena* and occasionally but very rarely words and phrases escape the pen of the scribes and notaries of the time.

Q.: How justifiable is the title of G.F. Abela as 'the Father of Maltese History'?

A.: He was certainly the first to write at length on several aspects of Maltese affairs, including Maltese history. Why begrudge him the title? But that does not mean that our local historians should continue to resort to his book for their version of history before his time. On the other hand, he is a prime and important source of information on the Malta and Gozo of his own time, the topography of the island and on buildings, like the old cathedral which no longer exist, etc.

Q.: Speaking of Abela as a good historian of his time, what are the new scientific techniques that are characteristic of modern historical writing?

A.: Abela was a typical antiquarian historian of the 17th century. The modern historian, among other things, makes a systematic and fundamental distinction between primary and secondary sources; he has at his disposal a large mass and a great variety of records partly in published form not only of local origin; he can use the most modern scientific techniques when he is required to check on the genuineness of particular documents he can use and is sometimes required to use statistics in reaching his conclusions, and he has computers at his disposal – particularly useful in indexing his work. I have not exhausted the list by any means.

Q.: How do you account for the fact that legends frequently creep into history books? How about such legends in our history?

A.: It is partly because, as I have said above, our interest in history is not completely genuine. We want to read and accept only that version of history which pleases us even if we have to rely on myths – and mythologisers are never difficult to find. In the past, myths and legends were concerned mainly with religion, kings, wars; at present, they serve very often ideologies, political parties, political leaders. Even cultural leaders like film stars, singers, etc., have their Public Relations people who very often, one suspects, go far beyond what is the strict truth.

It is surely no secret that legends have grown up around various topics in our history. The biblical account of the coming of St. Paul has led to the growth of a whole crop of them. The coming of the "Arabs" has led to another. Then there is the arrival of Count Roger in 1091, the Monroy rising in the 1420s, the insurrection against the French in 1798, etc. Myths and legends are normal in history. But it is the function of the serious historian to pick his way through them, recognising them for what they are, and trying his utmost to reveal the truth as he sees it. Other historians can normally be relied on to guard that he does not betray his trust.

The Arab occupation

Q.: How would you describe Malta's status in Arab times?

A.: Malta belonged to the same dynasty that ruled over Sicily and Tunisia, the Aghlabites and the Fatimids, and the subsidiary dynasty of the Kalbites who ruled over Sicily in the name of the Fatimids. We seem to have had here a *qa'd* subservient to the emir of Sicily. The Muslim inhabitants around 1048 consisted of free and unfree persons, the latter outnumbering the former. In that year, the latter obtained political and social freedom and equality from the former. This recalls the similar acquisition of equality of the *mawali* in other Muslim lands, the *mawali* themselves being normally of Christian origin but assimilated culturally and in religion to Islam in the course of time, so that after a generation or two they were accepted as equals, somewhat reluctantly, by the original Muslim conquerors. I would suggest that we have here, at least in part, the descendants of those who survived the Muslim invasion or invasions of 869 and 870 A.D. No Maltese Christians are mentioned either in 1048 or in 1091 when Count Roger came to Malta.

Q.: I wish you to comment on my opinion that Christianity may have co-existed on the Island with Islam through a minority of indigenous Maltese.

A.: It is difficult to say anything useful about such an opinion before I know what it is based on. I take it you are not basing it simply on a pious wish, because I am sure you would agree that such wishes, pious or not, cannot serve as sources of history. I am sure you also understand that history is not built up on supposed facts that merely cannot be disproved! The idea that any such Christians survived remains what it seems to me to be (until shown otherwise), a mere conjecture. To show that the existence of such indigenous Christians is possible might help, but one must also then take the other step and try to judge the probability of such a survival. I would say that there is insufficient clear and positive evidence of such a survival. The historian cannot therefore at the moment take it seriously. But then you have not yet told me what your evidence is.

It is in fact likely that there were no indigenous Christians left for the whole period ca. 1000-1150 A.D. During the period 870-ca. 1000 A.D. Christianity survived side by side with Islam but was diminishing in strength and eventually petered out. In the later period, from 1127 onwards, Christianity re-entered the Island, conversions of indigenous inhabitants however probably not becoming significant for more than a generation after that date.

On this matter in the wider Arabo-Muslim world abroad, undoubtedly the best study done so far is that of Richard W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: an Essay in Quantitative History* (Harvard University Press, 1979). I have myself written a paper on "The Arabs in Malta," for whatever it might be worth. Others have also written fairly recently.

Q.: How conclusive in your opinion is the contention that during Arab rule the population of Malta was Muslim?

A.: It is entirely based on a careful re-reading and consideration of the available documentation rather than on the discovery of any important new source. I and other historians before me, mostly foreign (of course!), have observed that, as I have said above, Maltese Christians are not mentioned either in 1048 or in 1091, contrary to what most (all?) *Maltese* writers have hitherto asserted, and that there is no reliable archaeological evidence of the survival of Christianity in the Maltese islands in the ninth to the eleventh centuries, that the writer of Bishop Burchard's journey to Saladin in 1175 described the Maltese people as *Saracens*, a term reserved for Muslim Arabic speakers and never then applied to Christians who happened to speak Arabic, like the Maronites. Another source (of Sicilian Greek origin) of which I have learned only recently from a colleague and which I have not yet seen personally, speaks of the Maltese as sons of *Hagar* and "atheists" ca. 1133.

Q.: Is it legend or history that when Count Roger landed in Malta he was welcomed by the Maltese with shouts of 'Kyrie Eleison'?

A.: He was greeted with such [(continued on opposite page)] [p.21] [(Continued from opposite page)] shouts by the foreign Christian captives whom he released from slavery and set free in Sicily. Maltese Christians are not documented to have participated and are not even mentioned at all in our source – the 1,000-word account of the taking of Malta by the Count written by his secretary, the monk Geoffrey Malaterra. Although normally negative evidence does not carry much weight, one must say that here one would expect Count Roger to have left the government in their hands had they formed a substantial portion of the population instead of leaving the local Muslims in charge, and would at least have insisted on their freedom and proper treatment had they been a small minority. Instead they are ignored completely.

Q.: How long did Islam survive in Malta after the Norman conquest?

A.: Ibn Khaldun, one of the furthestmost Arab historians, dates the expulsion of the Muslims to around 1249 A.D., when they seem to have been exiled to Lucera. There, Maltese Muslims continue to be met with by name until the dispersal of the Saracen community of Lucera in 1301. The diminution of Muslims and the increase of Christians seems to have been a very

gradual process, lasting from 1127 when King Roger took Malta and Ibn Khaldun's year of their expulsion, 1249, when presumably quite a few were able to remain in Malta by accepting Christianity, a common phenomenon in Sicily.

Q.: How do you account for the complete absence of mosques in medieval Malta?

A.: The Maltese building stone, generally needs replacement, according to what reliable experts have been heard to say, every 500 years. Therefore, it is difficult for buildings to exceed that age except when buried in earth. In addition, we know from what happened in Sicily that the reconquest by the Normans of Saracenic Sicily was accompanied by much wilful destruction. This could easily have happened here, but is not documented. Mosques also could be adapted for re-use as churches (especially if they formerly had been churches already), or rebuilt for the same purpose. Construction work on the Cathedral of Mdina is known to have occurred in 1299.

Q.: If you were to make a wish for the promotion of the study of Maltese history how would you word that wish?

A.: One of the first things, I should say, would be for the intellectual leaders to give an example to the rest by the genuineness of their own interest in history. Then I would expect them and other community leaders to give proper importance to the preservation of what remains from the past, though it must be recognised that living as we do on a small crowded island this would always create great and perhaps pretty insoluble problems.

I would expect the authorities to develop the recently set up Public Record Office suitably staffed with trained key persons, and that immediate steps be taken to salvage what remains and particularly what records have survived from, say, the late Middle Ages. I would expect responsible people to strive to preserve our medieval place-names and not want only help the ignorant in their foolish efforts to wipe them out.

I would expect History to be taught properly at University level without the constant fear that one's efforts to foster it will be nullified by a sudden change of government policy. And I would certainly also insist on its proper teaching in school – in a way which would not perpetuate the hatreds and prejudices of the past, but in a way that would lead to a respect for the history of the Maltese without any depreciation of that of other peoples and without omitting any faults we ourselves might have committed.

[by Professor J. Aquilina]